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2018

Water and African Liberation: The 1961 Kassanje Revolt

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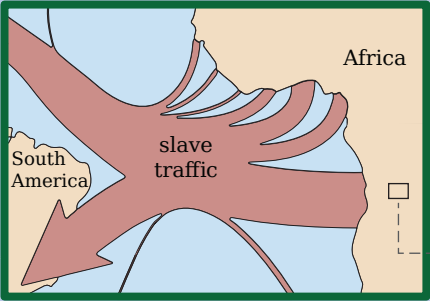


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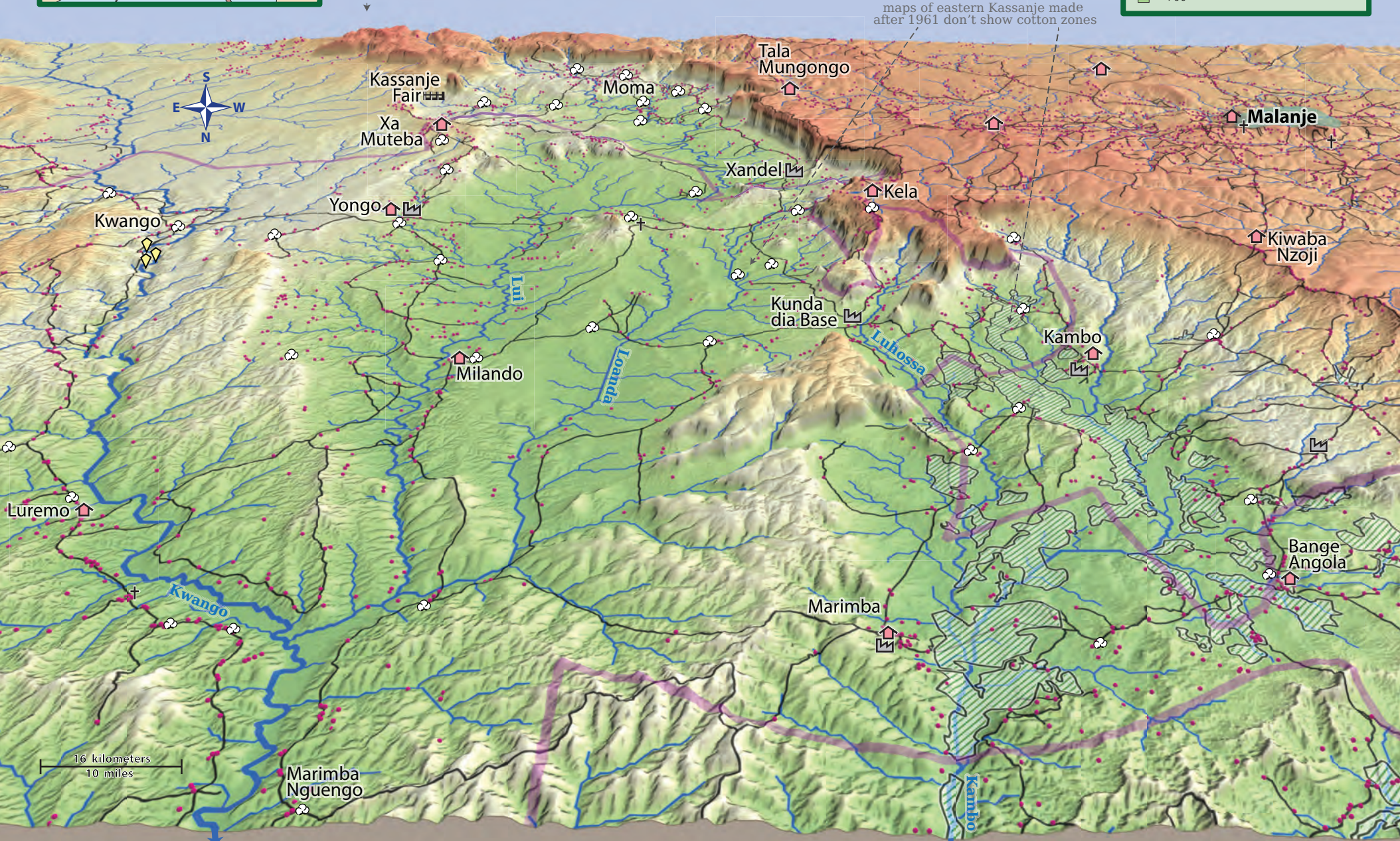
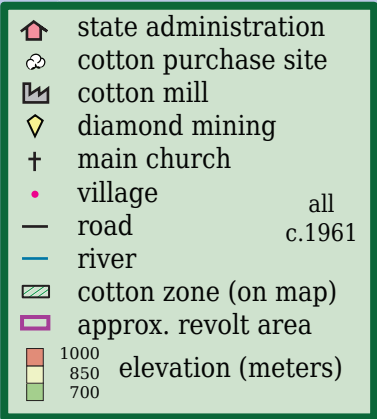
Water & African Liberation: The 1961 Kassanje Revolt

THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE in the Kassanje lowlands in north-central Angola revolted in early 1961, starting the national war for independence from Portugal. They sought self rule and objected to heavy colonial taxes, abuse, and forced cultivation in flood-prone lowland cotton zones along the north-flowing tributaries of the Kongo River. Colonial administrators had also forcibly relocated villages along newly built roads, and away from streams that women especially relied on.

PEOPLE turned water (*mwanya*) to their advantage by destroying bridges to block reprisals by trucks of soldiers from the provincial capital, Malanje. They also bolstered revolt recruits by baptisms with water, drawing on centuries of spiritual meaning. War continued, but this revolt ended after months of negotiations, arrests, army attacks and aerial bombings that displaced and killed thousands. The uprising is commemorated every January 4th.



PARTS of the Kassanje area are also known now for controversial diamond mining, and for histories of its fair (which for centuries was one of the most important slave and commodity markets in pre-colonial Africa, connecting vast trade and political networks). But the crucial roles of the area's water in nationalist revolt illustrate the great political significance also of transformations in day-to-day geographies of land, infrastructure and resources, for Angola and for Africa.



Sources: Digital Elevation Model SRTM 90m, <https://earthexplorer.usgs.gov>; Missão Geográfica de Angola, 1965, Carta de Angola; 15s River Data, <http://hydrosheds.cr.usgs.gov>; Arquivo Histórico Ultramarino; D. Eltis & D. Richardson, 2010, Atlas of the Transatlantic Slave Trade.